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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
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RHMFIASS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHMFIASS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1695
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1296
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1747
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1774
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1737
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 001597

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON SNARC AF TI

SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: DEMONSTRATIONS IN AUTONOMOUS REGION A SIGN OF UNREST

CLASSIFIED BY: THUSHEK, CHARGE D'AFFAIRES, STATE, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two demonstrations in front of the Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast governor's office August 18-19 illustrate increasing unrest in the economically downtrodden remote area also known as the Pamirs. The several hundred strong crowd protested against the central government and the arrest of a retired colonel -- a popular drug lord who provided generous assistance to the local community. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) During an August 18 visit to Khorog, capital of Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), PolOff and Regional Environment officer paid a courtesy call to GBAO Governor, Almamat Niezmamadov. At the beginning of the meeting, Niezmamadov's direct government line began ringing off the hook. He excused himself and left the room for twenty minutes. While EmbOffs curiously waited, their driver burst into the room and urged them to leave immediately, explaining there was a "conflict" at the front of the building. One minute later, the governor returned and apologized for his absence by saying "some people wanted to talk to him." Alarmed by the driver's warning, EmbOffs politely ended the meeting. As it turns out, the "some people" who "wanted to talk" to the governor amounted to an angry crowd loudly demanding to see him. As officials escorted EmbOffs past the front entrance and out the building's back door, EmbOffs could hear and see the large crowd. A small number of government officials stood by the entrance nervously.

¶3. (C) EmbOffs were escorted out the back door and around to the front of the building where their vehicle was parked behind the large crowd. Government officials and the local driver urged EmbOffs to leave. One American traveling with EmbOffs remained in the vehicle during the meetings and witnessed the entire demonstration.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

¶4. (SBU) According to different witnesses, around 3:45 pm, a group of young men emerged from the local police station

directly across the street from the governor's office. Two appeared to be heavily intoxicated and the group looked like they were ready to break into a fight. The young men then departed the scene. Several minutes later they came back and may have been brandishing small firearms and brought additional people to the scene. A crowd of 500-600 people, mainly young men, quickly gathered in front of the governor's office. They began yelling and chanting, demanding to speak to the governor. Government officials later reported that some in the crowd had firearms and were firing them in the air. Several women also joined the crowd, and some started wailing. Fearing violence, the women cried for the men to stop the demonstrations and return home.

¶5. (C) At approximately 5:10 pm, two white jeeps pulled up next to EmbOffs' vehicles and several men jumped out carrying a weapon which appeared to be a machine gun. The men pointed the weapon at the crowd in front of the building. They appeared to be plainclothes government officials and seemed to know everyone in the crowd. They urged the crowd to remain calm and dissolve; no shots were fired and no one was hurt. (NOTE: This contributed to the diminished numbers EmbOffs later witnessed. END NOTE.)

¶6. (SBU) Despite being across the street from the police station, no uniformed police were visible. At around 6:30pm EmbOffs revisited the site and the crowd has completely dissipated. The citizens of Khorog resumed their daily business and many were out on the streets. Embassy sources say a smaller group of about 50-60 people returned to the governor's office August 18 to continue protesting.

WHAT REALLY CAUSED THE PROTEST?

DUSHANBE 00001597 002 OF 003

¶7. (C) Local sources and government officials told PolOff that earlier in the week, authorities attempted to arrest a popular retired colonel living in Upper Khorog, a neighborhood economically worse off than Lower Khorog, considered the town's center. A shootout ensued and an innocent bystander was hurt. Ministry of Interior and Drug Control Agency officials told Post's Senior Law Enforcement Advisor the colonel is a drug-lord. Authorities moved in to arrest him, after already arresting several of his associates and seizing narcotics. The men involved in the argument in front of the police station supported the colonel and rallied the crowd in front of the governor's office.

¶8. (C) In a meeting with PolOff August 18, Deputy Governor Bekmurodi told PolOff the governor refused to speak with the crowd because of security reasons and instead negotiated with a small group of representatives from the group of demonstrators. The Governor promised the representatives he would rescind the arrest warrant. Conflicting reports from government officials make it unclear whether the colonel has been detained. (COMMENT: The governor does not have the authority to rescind the arrest warrant. His promise to do so was likely a temporary ploy to assuage the protestors. If he was unable to deliver on his promise, protestors may rally on his doorstep again. The protestors may also read his concession as a sign of weakness. END COMMENT.)

¶9. (C) PolChief visit Khorog August 19 with Deputy Assistant Secretary Feigenbaum and heard even more varied accounts of the

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August 17 event. Over lunch, the Mayor of Khorog told PolChief rival football teams were angry about the outcome of a football match, and chose to rumble. "Outside the governor's office?" she asked incredulously. "Wasn't the demonstration aimed against the government?" He shook his head. An Embassy bodyguard asked around town about the protest. One person admitted it was against the government, but local staff at the electricity plant made a point of denying entirely there had been any demonstration.

¶10. (C) An AmCit expat advisor working in Khorog on energy issues told PolChief the demonstration was about rival drug-lords: the colonel and the governor. The governor tried to have the colonel arrested after one of them violated an agreement on who could move their drugs first. The AmCit noted that Khorog city was divided between the two men, and there were parts of the city the electrical utility collectors couldn't go for fear of being shot. He noted the colonel had a reputation for doing good works in the neighborhood, "like Hezbollah," and his loyal supporters would not let the governor arrest him.

¶11. (C) Typical of state controlled media, no news agencies reported on the demonstrations. Demonstrations in Tajikistan are illegal, and a group hoping to demonstrate must receive permission from the government. This is the first demonstration in Khorog in recent memory, and clearly no one bothered to ask for permission. Demonstrations are also widely feared in Tajikistan by the government and the public who remember the initial days of the civil war triggered by rival demonstrations in Dushanbe's main squares.

US VS. THEM

¶12. (C) During the demonstration, one passerby told Embassy source that this "was the worst case of authority abuse in years." During PolOff's meeting with Deputy to the Governor Bekmurodi August 18, he confirmed that the people were upset over the arrest of the colonel, but underlying tension between the local people and central government authorities was nothing new. Bekmurodi spoke at length on the history of the Pamirs and the people's distinct identity. Although acknowledging that most people also consider themselves Tajik, he frequently spoke in terms of "us" and "them".

¶13. (C) Embassy sources say one reason behind the protest is the central government's recent appointment of several Kulobis from the President's home region to high level positions in

DUSHANBE 00001597 003 OF 003

GBAO. President Rahmonov appointed the governor and his deputy; both are Pamiri. Niezmamadov has been governor for 13 years and generally, the people have recognized that he has done a lot of good for the region, but Bekmurodi insinuated that the governor may retire at the end of 2006. He also commented that in the past few years there have been many problems in GBAO's more remote districts, but did not elaborate.

¶14. (C) Bekmurodi suggested the majority of the population in GBAO would ideally like to be independent from Tajikistan, but understand they depend on the rest of the country for economic survival. Many people are frustrated with the high unemployment and the lack of trade and economic growth the rest of Tajikistan is seeing. Five years ago, the government subsidized 92 percent of GBAO's budget. Today, the rate has decreased to 84 percent and the government's plan is to have the region's economy self-sustainable by 2015. Bekmurodi admitted it would not be in the central government's interest to have a self-sustaining economy in GBAO and would likely extend subsidizing the region beyond 2015 in order to retain control.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The colonel's arrest was the catalyst that sparked the protest, but the demonstrations reflect the people's frustration with government authorities. Although the government managed to quell the demonstrations, its next steps are unclear. If the government insists on arresting the drug-trafficking colonel, it will surely face resistance from the people he has helped. However, if he eludes detention, it sends the message that rule of law is not upheld and drug lords are on equal par with the government, wielding considerable power. However, if people widely believe that the governor himself is a drug baron, the colonel's arrest will seem less like a triumph over narco-trafficking, and more like a familiar abuse of power. END COMMENT.

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